

America's Image Abroad

From the Continent

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IN AN interview a while ago, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn strongly criticized the Voice of America and Radio Liberty—the radio stations that broadcast America's message to the Russian people. "Your broadcasts are conducted so primitively," Solzhenitsyn said, "that they project a false image of your country; they speak about the most superficial, the most trite things, so that our people have a lower opinion of the American people than the American people deserve." And then: "Your broadcasts do not give our people the spiritual help they need. That is one side. The other side—you present yourselves as being lower and less significant than you really are, i.e., you are doing yourselves harm." If America is ever going to present its message successfully, to the Russian people as well as to the rest of the world, Americans must first come to understand who and what they are.

I have lived a grand total of 16 years in the United States and have visited all fifty states—the only regions that have eluded me so far are northernmost Michigan and southeast Oregon. Let me therefore candidly say that America's reputation abroad is so thoroughly false that it takes a foreigner years to discover that his assumptions, most of them created by Americans themselves, have been utterly wrong.

Whether at home or abroad, Americans like to boast that they are a nation of young, healthy, dollar-chasing, revolutionary, classless barbarians who eagerly embrace everything that is new. It should suffice here to recall that no American revolution ever took place, merely a war of independence; that as Chesterton pointed out, a nation which produced Whistler and Henry James isn't a nation of healthy young barbarians; that love of money is a characteristic European vice; that status is actually what makes America tick. Of course, it is true that our society really knows itself (any more than most indi-

viduals know themselves), and that societies tend to emphasize precisely the values they lack—*vide* "the golden heart of Vienna" or "German loyalty," two famous legends.

When they don't succumb to neo-American masochism, American media exports occasionally attempt to present the United States in the most favorable light. Sometimes they even succeed. The television series about the Adams family from Sam to Henry—*The Adams Chronicles*—was truly excellent, even if most Europeans missed a few of its subtleties. And *Backstairs at the White House*, the series about the servants, black and white, who have ministered to America's Presidents, was not bad. But *Dallas*, eagerly watched throughout Europe, is another matter. While it is entertaining—even, I might say, occasionally amusing—it presents a distorted and alarming view of America. Except for Miss Ellie, there isn't a single admirable character on the show. I am frequently asked if all Americans behave in the manner portrayed on the show.

Yet *Dallas* is far superior to some of America's other cultural exports. By far the worst offering to reach European television from the United States was a short film about the combat-training of some American women—viragos with blackened faces bayoneting sandbags. If this film is any indication, the next war promises to be a sadistic orgy. Whoever made it richly deserves the Lenin Prize.

America's cultural greatness lies largely in its literature, a very Anglo-Saxon trait. At the moment, however, I don't believe there is any great literature being produced in America—nor, it is only fair to state, anywhere else outside of Russia or Latin America. Still, the treasures of the past, in the original or in translation, can be used for propaganda purposes ("propaganda" correctly understood, as the unfortunate Mr. Philip Nicolaides used the term during his too brief tenure at the Voice of America). Also, America has developed a very dis-

tinguished style of modern architecture, and it's certainly legitimate to boast of handsomely designed skyscrapers, of superb machinery, and of that breathtaking enterprise—America's lunar exploration.

We in Europe know too little about much of American history, and are particularly unaware of the South and Southwest. The church of San Xavier del Bac in Arizona or of San Luis Rey in California would strike many a European as familiar. Seeing American history "in stone" would help form a link between the two continents.

Then there is America's natural beauty, far more impressive in the West than in the East. Yellowstone National Park is a paradise, especially for children, and the many-shaded beauty of the Grand Canyon surely ranks as the greatest sight in the world as far as landscape is concerned.

I am frequently astonished at how few Europeans realize that America has some of the finest art museums in the world. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the Chicago Art Institute are justly world-famous, but how many Europeans have heard of the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, or of the art galleries of Cleveland, Toledo, or Minneapolis, even if they have heard of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts?

BUT BEWARE of emphasizing or exporting what the Germans call *der Amerikanismus*—Americanism in a political sense. There is a popular belief in Europe that we in the Old World would have lived happily ever after in a sort of Gothic style if the wicked Americans hadn't inflicted the machine age and commercialism on us. This, of course, is nonsense; both sides of the Atlantic have helped to develop modern technology and economics. But it's high time for America to present to the rest of the world her cultural heritage and treasures rather than her political system—and especially to stop trying to pressure other countries into following her political lead. And as for the enslaved and silenced nations, America should recall their past and remind them of their great traditions, which Communist tyrants are attempting to destroy. A patient should be treated according to his own complaint; after all, what's good for his physician might not be good for him. □